

"The Real Question"

A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr

First Presbyterian New Canaan – October 18, 2020

PLEASE READ:

Isaiah 45:1-7

Matthew 22:15-22

With the United States presidential elections coming up in a few weeks, several friends and family members have asked me, “What do you think of President Trump?” or “What do you think of Vice President Biden?” Although we've been in France for 12 years, I have my opinions, but I am sticking to Proverbs 17:28, “Even fools who keep silent are considered wise; when they close their lips, they seem intelligent!”

When asked a loaded political question, Jesus wisely replied, "Give therefore to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." How we obey Jesus' command has been a source of controversy ever since! Too often we hear comments like, "The church should steer clear of politics," or "religion and politics don't mix," or "remember the separation of church and state." Once I was told to stick to preaching the Gospel, as though the Gospel had nothing to do with current issues or politics. Just to be clear: I desire nothing more than to preach the Gospel, but I would hope to preach the *whole* gospel. As we'll see in our lessons, we are to embody our faith in God, *especially* in the politics of our day...

The first thing that we should note in our gospel text is that Jesus is speaking in the temple. He recently drove out the temple moneychangers. They were there because Roman coins were both legal tender but political propaganda and were not allowed in temple offerings. Roman coins had an image of Caesar stamped on them and phrases like “Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest.” Paying taxes or making offerings to God with such money raised political and spiritual issues. How would you feel if there were pictures of President Trump on a dollar bill with the inscription “Trump is lord” on them? And then you had to put that in the offering plate each Sunday?

The second thing you need to remember is that the Pharisees and the Herodians were politically active religious sects of opposing views. The Pharisees hated the Romans, and the Herodians opted to cooperate with Herod, Rome's appointed ruler in the region.

The question they asked, “Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” was a trap in the sense that the Pharisees hoped Jesus would say *no* and so would be accused as an enemy of the Roman occupying forces. The Herodians, on the other hand, wanted him to say *yes*, and thereby Jesus would be accused as an enemy of the Jewish nationalists who wanted to oust the Romans. Jesus calls them both hypocrites, literally “actors” who were more concerned about their political priorities than the priorities of God.

This is the context in which we need to understand Jesus' provocative statement about giving to the Emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's. In case you were wondering how to divide that up, the Psalmist puts it this way: “The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it” (Psalm 24.1). According to Jesus, everything came under the rule of God, even politics, even the emperor! This is what makes the Christian claim *Jesus is Lord* so radical. It was instead of saying *Caesar is Lord*. And this is where faith gets mixed up in politics.

Allow me to clarify what I mean by *politics*. The words 'politics' and 'political' may be given either a broad or a narrow definition. Broadly speaking, 'politics' denotes the life of the city (*polis*) and the responsibilities of the citizen (*polites*) [astonishingly, the Greek basis for our English word "polite"]. Politics is concerned therefore with the whole of our life in human society; the art of living together in community. According to its narrow definition, however, politics is the science of government.

It is in the former sense, which I believe Jesus makes the greatest challenge to us. Some Christians, of course, have a political vocation and are called to develop and promote specific policies to establish legislation that promotes God's justice and mercy. I've been impressed with members of our church who are or have been involved in significant ways in local government. But all of us are called to be concerned with our life in human society, especially in these days of Black Lives Matter and COVID-19 when so many are suffering from unemployment or isolation...

All of us are responsible to be witnesses to the gospel in the art of living together in community. So, in one sense, Christians can't opt out of politics, and that includes paying taxes. "I like to pay taxes," wrote Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. "With them, I buy civilization." Indeed, Christians are to be involved in all dimensions of public and political life. The question is, to what end?

Our Old Testament text is fascinating and reminds anyone involved in politics that God alone is sovereign. Cyrus was the Babylonian King (the Enemy of Israel) whom God used to bring about the return of the exiles. The point of the Isaiah text, and the hope that it gives us, is that God is sovereign above all other leaders. Later in Isaiah 45:18, we read God's declaration, "I am the LORD, and there is no other!" But who is this Lord?

It is the news of a *suffering* servant that "startled many nations" (Isaiah 52:15). Cyrus looked good by the imperial standards of his time, but the Jewish movement that became Christianity continued to redefine what a messiah was in important ways.

It is the Christian claim that Jesus, and not an authoritarian emperor, shows us the way of God, and paradoxically, the full glory of God. Jesus could have capitalized on the political momentum of his day. He could have had it all. He could have manipulated the crowds and gained political power for himself. I'm sure he could have overthrown Pilate, Herod, or even Caesar if he wanted. He could have called down legions of heavenly angels to destroy the Roman oppressors if that was his political agenda.

But he did not. He did not use *political force* or *political power* to bring about change. This is troubling to many who would just as soon have Jesus get on with it and fix all the social and systemic ills of our world. Haven't you ever wondered why Jesus did not take power when he had the chance?

This is where our definitions become so important. Jesus moved people toward action, but in a way contrary to anyone's expectations! Jesus had the opportunity to lead as a powerful *political king*, but he chose to usher in his kingdom as the *servant king*.

Too often, well-meaning Christians try to put a certain social agenda up as the battle cry for the whole church. And there is a basis in scripture for being a part of a change in social structures and systems which are unjust. There are times when we are called to make signs and march, to get out the vote as an act of faith. Very clearly, the biblical prophets call us to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly” in a public way.

But beware. Jesus marches in a surprising direction. At the climax of his public popularity; just when he could have most easily moved the masses toward some sweeping political and powerful revolution, he humbly speaks the truth to power and gives himself up to God’s will. Jesus responds not to the clamoring of the power-seeking crowds, but the solitary silence of self-giving love. He marches to the cross, and this, paradoxically, was his crowning glory. If you notice, there is a huge cross in our sanctuary. I love that. If you think about it, the cross is an enormous political statement.

At the cross, Jesus showed he would not bend to the lordship of Caesar. He was completely free to give himself in service to the Kingdom of God. He gave himself to reconcile not only individuals like you and me but structures and systems, even whole cultures and nations back to God.

I believe Jesus calls us to follow his example by being servant leaders in all arenas of public and private life. Wesley Avram asks, “What if we were to change in the Lord’s prayer, ‘Thy Kingdom come,’ to something like ‘Thy politics come’ or ‘Thy economics come’? (Thy Court systems come? Thy food distribution come? etc.) Then we would not be able to keep religion safely personal and private, would we?” Maybe “Thy Kingdom come” is the most politically subversive statement we utter every Sunday?

We are to be servant leaders in the world, whether we are students or teachers in school, employed by the government, dealing in finance or banking, acting as head of a company, or working in service to one who is. Whatever station in life we may have, we can both experience and mediate the glorious presence of God through the radical obedience of humble service... Think about that later when we say “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven...”

The way of the cross was Jesus' way of both showing the full glory of God and at the same time challenging people with their political responsibilities (which, by the way, includes voting)! Jesus’ final statement ends the debate, but it leaves unspoken the real question that we all must answer. Will we worship the one whose image is stamped on a coin (on a building or campaign poster)? Or will we worship the one who is the very image of God-with-us?

I probably have said too much already, and if I am a fool, may it be a fool for Christ! But as the political winds of change come and go, whatever your circumstances, whatever your power, whatever your political convictions, Jesus reminds us all to give to God the things that are God’s. That, my friends, includes everything! So, when the election rhetoric becomes shrill in the next couple of weeks, may others see we are not just about foolish talk, but about real change through radical acts of service and self-giving love. The real question will always be: Will the world see Jesus, the presence of our loving and gracious God, embodied in our thoughts, words, and actions?

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. AMEN.*